

Rug merchant shares a cultural odyssey

By Robert Knox
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DUXBURY — "It's important for people to understand that rugs are more than utilitarian items to put on the floor, and to understand the culture they come from," said John Gregorian. "The designs, the materials, it's all done by hand... It's an indigenous art form."

Gregorian, who is president of the Arthur T. Gregorian Inc. rug store in Newton Lower Falls, is coming to the Duxbury Free Library at 4 p.m. Sunday to discuss his book, "Oriental Rugs of the Silk Route: Culture, Process and Selection." The program is free.

For library director Elaine Winquist, the program is not only about rugs — it's about the Middle East.

"We started the series on Islam this winter," Winquist said, referring to a four-part series on "Islam and the Modern World" hosted by the library, "and decided it would be nice to do something on Middle Eastern culture."

The library will also present a display of related books and small antique oriental rugs. Westwinds Bookshop in Duxbury will have copies of his book available for purchase and signing at the library. Refreshments will



JOHN GREGORIAN

also be available.

Learning about rugs involves learning about the world that produces them, Gregorian says, because their beauty is a reflection of a deeply rooted culture. The artists are creating through a painstaking operation carried out over long periods of time.

"An ordinary 9-by-12-foot room-sized rug represents four to six months work by four people," he writes in his book. "In the Middle East the concept of time is so far removed from our hurried, time-is-money Western culture that we can barely fathom the villagers' view."

The geometric patterns so prevalent in the design of Oriental rugs represent a calm acceptance of life as it comes, Gregorian says. Imperfections are part of that fatalism. While symmetry

is essential to rug design, the pattern is never perfectly realized.

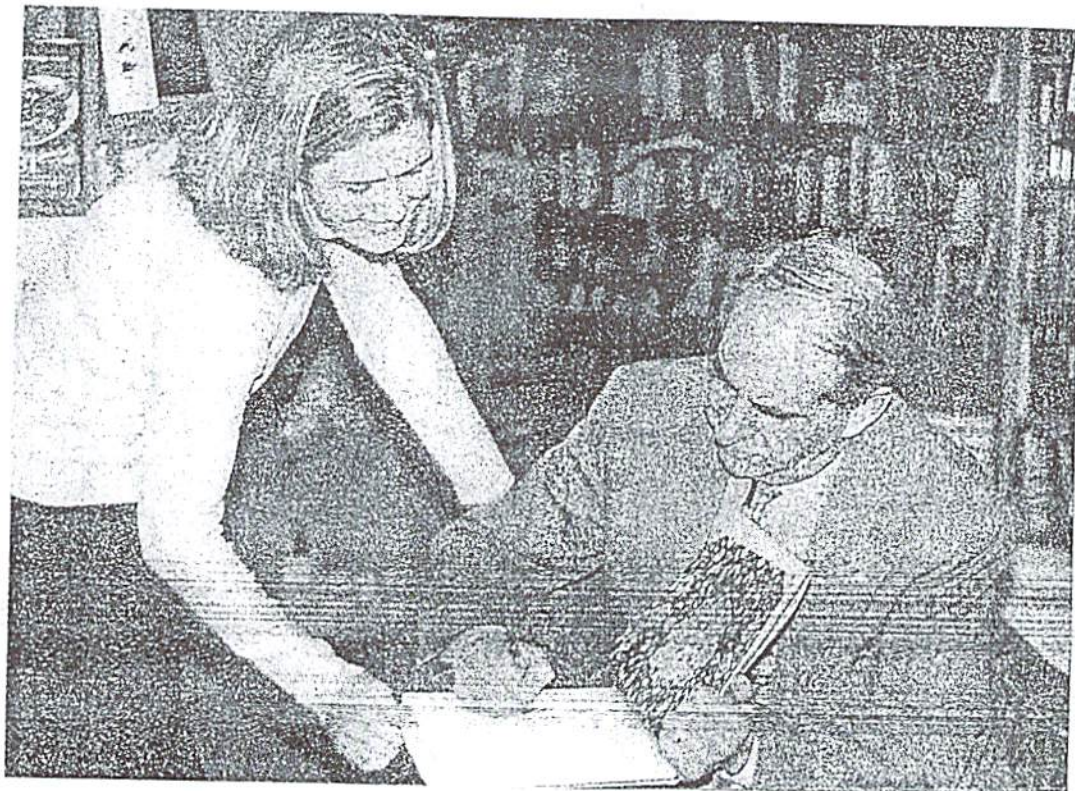
For decades, following in his father's footsteps, Gregorian has traveled to the places where the rugs are made. His first rug-buying trip in 1959 was like a tour of family history. His father, Arthur, took him to the part of Iran where he was born and from which his father fled during World War I. It was a time during which many Christian Armenians were massacred by Ottoman Turkey.

"It was a real eye opener," Gregorian said of that trip.

"You become involved in the people and the culture," he said of his many rug-buying trips to the lands along the Silk Route, the ancient caravan trade path that connected one end of the Old World to the other and was traveled by Marco Polo. Gregorian's 20th-century travels brought him into contact with societies in some ways not much changed from those the medieval explorer encountered.

"They are very warm and wonderful people," he said. "They really accept you when they come to your level. There is a certain amount of posturing. They want to make sure you understand who they are and what they do."

"Drinking tea is very much part of the culture. Nothing can



*'Nothing can be done until you sit down and drink tea.
It establishes a relationship.'*

JOHN GREGORIAN, on what he's learned of Middle East culture. Above, at a book signing.

be done until you sit down and drink tea. It establishes a relationship. It puts everybody on the same plane." If you go to a bazaar in Turkey, tea comes out of the woodwork. "It's like the peace pipe."

In recent years, he said, the main production areas for Oriental rugs are India and Pakistan. "And China is coming up."

Arthur Gregorian, who started the business in 1934, also began the family collection of an-

tique rugs, which is exhibited today at colleges and museums. An exhibition is currently mounted at the Marion Art Center. The rugs were brought to America in the 19th century on ships that originally sailed from Massachusetts ports.

"The height of their popularity was the 19th century," Gregorian said. "The rugs were appreciated as an exotic art form. They were very inexpensive . . . They were simply used. The old Brah-

mins, they had great taste."

Writing a book on the subject was a natural extension of Gregorian's activities as a teacher and speaker. He taught survey courses on Oriental rugs at adult education centers and at the family's Newton store, and eventually began writing down his thoughts. Speaking about rugs and selling them "go hand in hand," he acknowledged, "but I don't do it for that reason. It's a passion for me."